

BOOK REVIEWS

Krishna Hachhethu. 2002. *Party Building in Nepal: Organisation, Leadership and People*. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point.

After the *Jana Āndolan* of 1990, which put an end to the 30-year old king-led Panchayat regime, and the subsequent promulgation of a somewhat progressive Constitution of 1990, it was hoped that Nepal would enter an era of liberal democratic politics. In the years thereafter elections were held, parliamentary activities were conducted, governments were formed, i.e., the rituals of constitutional monarchy and a multiparty democratic system were performed as envisaged in the Constitution. Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist, UML) who had played vital roles in the movement for the restoration of democracy emerged as the two largest parties in the parliament. These two parties also won the local elections and, at times, it also looked like Nepali politics was heading towards a two-party system.

However, by 2003, the political scenario looked completely different. Two other strong contenders—the extreme left force led by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and the extreme right force led by the king with the backing of the Royal Nepal Army—are powerful in the political field. And, in fact, these two armed forces are now in the forefront and the other two parties have been relegated to the sidelines. And the middle space where hitherto these two parties were active has shrunk.

Several news reports tell us that many village level leaders, especially those belonging to the NC, have been killed during the conflict. Others have either been forced to leave their place of work or have been banished from doing any sort of party activities. Some of the cadres from the parties have also joined the extremist forces. A conservative estimate is that one quarter of the UML workers or sympathisers have joined the Maoists as activists or supporters. Moreover, the nodal agency, namely, local elected bodies which showed the party presence and activity in the rural areas collapsed when the then Sher Bahadur Deuba government did not extend their tenure (as was possible legally) after the end of their five-year term period. The NC and UML, therefore, have virtually no presence in the village level and their activities are now concentrated only in the

district centres or in the capital, Kathmandu. Yet, in the absence of any instrument/election to measure the influence of these contending forces, it is difficult to assess the size of the support base of extremist forces or how diminished the influence of the NC and UML is throughout the country. The important question however is how the two parties (NC and UML), which at one time were omnipotent and omnipresent, were relegated to such a dismal position in such a short period? From where did the other two extreme forces emerge and were able to expand their scope and how did the democratic polity collapse so easily? One simple answer is that this happened because the two parties which were considered as the chief players of Nepali democracy failed to perform and failed to protect their constituencies. And in a way their failure has cost a lot as Nepali people now have lost their sovereignty.

The Nepali democracy's second coming deserves more scholarly attention than it is getting presently. Not much serious effort has been applied to this subject, at least to this reviewer's knowledge. Hachhethu's *Party Building in Nepal* is one of few that deals with the theme and it is a commendable effort. The book, which emanated from the author's PhD thesis submitted to Tribhuvan University, provides sound documentation of the two competing parties, NC and UML, especially their party building efforts as well as the subsequent fallout of those efforts in the functioning and performance of the parties and the governments they formed. The basis of the analysis is the data obtained from the field research done by the author in 1995-96. As such Hachhethu's research data might not be sufficient to explain the events that occurred afterwards, though the author has tried to accommodate the latest developments in the conclusion of the book. Despite the time-frame, it provides a window into the functioning of the two key players of post-1990 era and prepares the ground for any subsequent analysis.

In seven chapters *Party Building in Nepal* tries to explain why and how the "NC and UML succeeded more than other political parties in expanding their support bases among various segments of the society" (p. 3). The author uses four variables namely expansion, system, harmony and dynamism to analyse the party-building process of the two parties. After discussing on the origin and development of the parties the author delves into their leadership building process.

It seems that there is no real 'process' as such in both the parties for leadership building. Both parties, established in 1940s with a socialist goal, have been considered as agents for transformation and had fought against the Rana-led and later against the Shah-led conservative,

fundamentalist/feudal forces. But, after 1990 they tried to outmanoeuvre each other in a bid to take the same conservative forces groomed by Mahendra and his son in their fold rather than create new leadership that would be representative of all sections of society. In this race Congress outpaced UML. By 1995, the situation was such that, of the total elected village level leadership in the NC, around 40 percent were former Panchas. At the district level, it was about 25 percent. UML was no different. Its 25 percent elected village level leaders were former Panchas. This trend did not stop but continued to increase in the later years and converted the two parties from change agents to agents blocking the change. It would be interesting here to note that in 2000 when the then prime minister, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, was forced to vacate his post of PM due to intra-party conflict, two former Panchas, Arjun Narsingh KC and Benup Raj Prasai were the spokespersons of the NC central committee and NC parliamentary committee, respectively and both were forerunners in aggravating the crisis.

Taking age, education, occupation, economic status, family background, and caste/ethnicity as variables, the author has tried to measure the inclusiveness or representativeness of the party-leadership. In general both the parties maybe seen as representing all section of the society in their leadership in village level, though they do not have special provisions for this. In the lower level UML leadership dalits and janajatis have higher representation than in Congress. But in the higher level there is little representativeness in both parties; the higher the leadership position lesser the diversity. The high level posts in both parties are occupied mostly by the high castes, educated to some extent and 'thalus' (elites). UML is Bahun-dominated and has lower representation of Tarai people compared to Congress, which is Bahun-Chhetri dominated. Newars are in good positions in both the parties. When looking at social differentiations and their reflection within party structures and organisations, there is a serious lacuna in Hachhethu's book. 'Gender' as a social category is missing from the book's data and analysis; it finds only passing mention in the introduction and conclusion.

The shift of parties from being progressive forces to assuming more rightist or status quo positions at the ground level, from being more representative to being more exclusivist, especially in the district and central level, is accompanied by ideological shifts. One common stand of both the parties was their uncritical acceptance of World Bank-International Monetary Fund-WTO diktats. This handing over of Nepal to market-led globalisation, structural adjustment and conditional loans,

weakened their commitment to the 'people'. A small example of this 'sell out' is UML's removal of the portraits of 'great comrades' from the meeting room when the US ambassador visited its head office at Balkhu. Such desperate little gestures were indicative of a larger problem, an abandoning of the alternative questioning space, which may have contributed to the popularity of more radical forces whose rhetoric seemed pristine. Because the purer tendency came with arms, the ultra right, status quo, also armed, could be pressed into service without qualm.

In subsequent chapters the author explains other important issues, including the organisational structure; internal conflict and conflict management process; relationship of party/leadership with the general public; candidacy and elections; relationship between higher and lower level organisations; relationship between organisational and elected wings and patronage distribution pertaining to party building processes of the two parties. The author describes the progress of the two parties in attaining the dramatic organisational growth from being underground organisations with a few thousand members and having more or less only district level presence in around two-third of the districts into a presence virtually in every villages of the country with expanded memberships. The expansion however came with a price. The transformation, author writes, "followed the changes in the parties' goals and activities and the parties began acquiring new characteristics i.e. growth in size; expansion and diversification of organisational structures and networks; de-ideologisation; increase in divisive tendencies; delinking from the masses; erosion in the leaders' popularity and authority; use of state power and resources for parties' interests; patronage distribution to parties' clients; etc." (p. 259). When ideological bases of parties become weak, and they increasingly become distant from the masses, the fate of those parties is predictable.

By the time this book was published in 2002, the political scenario was drastically different from what had obtained when the research was completed in 1996. As mentioned, the palace and the Maoists had become extraordinarily strong in the interim. The research therefore could not take these forces into consideration. Perhaps, a postscript could have been added to reiterate the relevance of the book. However it is clear that though that there is no explicit mention of the Maoists and the palace, the problems and trials of the development and activities of the two major parliamentary parties themselves leave open the scope for more left- and right-oriented forces to show their strengths.

This important study is a document of the party-building process of the two largest formations in the parliamentary scene in Nepal. It chronicles the transformation of these parties “from illegal organisations to legitimate contenders of political power, from cadre based parties to mass based parties, from a small group of people sharing common interests to heterogeneous organisations consisting of people of diverse interests, ideology oriented organisations to power seeking parties” (p. 259). The book helps us to understand the political process of the post-*Jana Āndolan* period. It is especially important to understand the limitations of the parties from a concretely historical and sociological perspective before dismissing them and their leaders out of hand.

Ramesh Parajuli

Martin Chautari and CSRD